MeetingWorld To Examine How Societal Trends Impact Programs

By Donna M. Airoldi

New York — "The times, they are a-changin'," wrote Bob Dylan — words that are as true today as when first sung some 40 years ago.

The Baby Boomers who were coming of age back then, and reading this now, might be nodding their heads in agreement. Those in the Gen Y crowd could very well be furrowing their brow and thinking, "Bob *who*?"

Lalia Rach

Regardless of which camp you are in, the featured general session at this year's MeetingWorld conference and trade show — titled "Social Study: Creating Meetings in a Changing World" — is a must-attend event for planners intent on keeping up with today's trends and social shifts and incorporating them into the way they develop meeting content.

MeetingWorld, to be held July 12-13 at the Grand Hyatt New York, will include numerous educational sessions, a trade show with more than 200 exhibitors, and several networking forums. For more information, visit www.meetingworld2004.com.

The way meetings are presented is a reflection of the society we live in. And this facilitated discussion will explore how shifting societal trends — demographic, generational, multicultural and gender-identity ones, as well as the aging of the population — are influencing, and will continue to influence, the needs and wants of meeting attendees.

"I want to look at how some trends are becoming part of everyday life, what they mean for our professional life and how they're impacting our ability to succeed," said Lalia Rach, associate dean at New York University's Tisch Center for Hospitality, Tourism & Sports Management, who will serve as the session's moderator.

"Change is constant; change is rapid," she said. "The consumer has changed. How much do we really understand and work for that specific client or guest to maintain them and let them know how valuable they are?

Joan Eisenstodt

"Gen Y is the first connected and first global generation. Look at travel. For Boomers, only the children of affluent families had flown a number of times to different continents. Today, it is not based on wealth. Travel has become part of middle-class values. Children who see more of the world are better off. That's just one huge difference."

Jim Carroll

Rach will be joined for the discussion by veteran meetings management consultant Joan Eisenstodt and innovations and trends expert Jim Carroll.

Eisenstodt, chief strategist for Washington-based Eisenstodt & Associates, hopes the session will help planners think more broadly.

"Our industry doesn't look enough at the world and the implications it has for meetings," she said. "How are we incorporating generational, cultural and educational issues? Meetings must be looked at differently. It's learning how to ask questions and not just giving answers. If I can get a few people to ask a few more questions, it will be huge."

Carroll, based near Toronto, believes the pace of change in business and organizations also has important implications for meetings. "Learning is what most adults will be doing in the 21st century," he said. "Products are coming on the market faster than ever before, and organizations are struggling with issues of how to get a sales force to understand strategy and the nature of products."

Regarding demographics, Carroll's concern is the massive skills exodus that is anticipated as the 78 million Baby Boomers retire and there are only 48 million Gen Xers to replace them. "A lot of knowledge will walk out the door," he said. "How do we transfer that from one generation to the next? Meetings can play a role in that."

Said Rach, "I'm confident that the panel will take on some long-held traditions in the industry and really talk about them," said Rach.

Contact Donna M. Airoldi at dairoldi@meetingnews.com.